

Whitelaw Apartment Hotel
1039 Thirteenth Street, N.W.
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-363

HABS,
DC,
WASH.,
235 -

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. DC-363

WHITELAW APARTMENT HOTEL

Location: 1839 Thirteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.
USGS Washington West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 18.324030.4309290.

Present Owner: Talley H. Holmes Jr., 1345 T Street, N.W.

Present Use: Vacant.

Significance: The building was described in 1919 as the "first hotel apartment of its size built for the exclusive use of colored people in this country." (Washington Bee, July 19, 1919). It was built at a cost of over \$100,000, in the flush of World War I prosperity.

The originator of the hotel was John W. Lewis, the founder of the Industrial Savings Bank on U Street (which was the predecessor of the present Industrial Bank), and, according to the Bee (August 17, 1919) "the first colored financier that has ever been a success in Washington." Lewis organized a stock company, the Whitelaw Apartment House Company, to raise the necessary money. He stressed that he wanted blacks, not whites, to invest, "so when this prosperity . . . passes, they can see buildings towering skyward and say to the world 'this is what we have gotten out of prosperity'" (Bee, October 5, 1918).

The hotel filled a need at a time of segregation when there was "not a hotel in Washington to accommodate our friends when they come to the city from other parts of the country" (Bee, October 5, 1918).

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: On July 5, 1918, a permit to build was issued (D.C. Building Permit #556, July 5, 1918, U.S. Archives). The building was apparently almost ready for occupancy by August 1, 1919 (Bee, July 19, 1919).
2. Architect: Isaiah T. Hatton. Hatton, according to the U.S. Census of 1900, was born in Maryland in 1888. The Bee of July 5, 1919, described him as a "product of the Washington schools."

District of Columbia directories as early as 1909 list him as a draftsman. In 1911 and 1912 city directories list Isaiah T. Hatton at 317 6th Street N.W.; this was the same address used by John A. Lankford for his architectural office in 1910. It is probable that Hatton first worked for Lankford and began an independent practice when Lankford left the city for a few years beginning in 1911. From 1913 to 1917 Hatton was listed as an architect in city directories.

Besides the Whitelaw Hotel, the only other building known to have been designed by Hatton was the Industrial Bank Building (also founded by John W. Lewis, the originator of the Whitelaw) at U and 11th Streets, N.W. (Bee, June 30, 1917).

The last listing of Hatton in the D.C. Directory was in 1917, when he maintained an architectural office at 1314 G Street, N.W., and lived in Glendale, Maryland. However, on the building license for the Whitelaw, in 1918, his address was given as 1200 U Street, N.W. [the True Reformer Building (HABS No. DC-362)]. Nothing else is known of his later career or life.

3. Original and subsequent owners:

Liber 4050, Folio 387

George W. Brown et ux
deeded the property to
John W. Lewis et ux

October 29, 1919
Liber 4277, Folio 72

John W. Brown et ux
deeded the property to
Whitelaw Apartment House
Company.

May 18, 1934
Liber 703, Folio 197

The building was
purchased on or about
this date by Talley R.
Holmes and others. The
building remains, in
1979, in the Holmes
family.

4. Builder: The Bee of July 5, 1919, said that J. C. Reeder was "head carpenter," and that "every workman is colored." A Jacob L. Reeder, carpenter, was listed in city directories of the period.

5. Original plans and construction: With few exceptions the building is still arranged as it was originally. There are no apparent structural changes. Not all of the originally planned features were incorporated, however. For instance, a walled area adjoining the T Street entrance indicates where the intended elevator was to have been.
 6. Alterations: A few apartments in the north wing were converted to transient rooms during World War II.
- B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:
According to the present owner, the hotel was a favorite place to stay for performers at the nearby Howard Theatre. Joe Louis is also known to have been a guest. For several years the elegant dining room was a favorite gathering place for social events of the upper-class black community.
- C. Sources of Information:
1. Old views: Scurlock Studios, Washington, D.C., has old photographs of the building. The Washington Bee, July 5, 1919, has the architect's rendering of the exterior.
 2. Bibliography: The Washington Bee, July 5, 1919, gives details of the building's features in a lengthy article.

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PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The 1919 description of the building as "striking, without undue ostentation or expense," still seems appropriate. The structure is one of the most architecturally distinctive landmarks in its area of the city.
2. Condition of fabric: The building is vacant and in a deteriorated condition. The most serious damage has been to the fine plasterwork, woodwork, and art-glass ceiling of the first floor dining room. The building, however, is structurally sound.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 94' along Thirteenth Street, and 100' along T Street (both dimensions include the 4' tower-like projections on the Thirteenth and T Street facades). The building is 47'-9" high from the sidewalk to the highest part of the roof at the front. (Dimensions are from the D.C. Building Permit #556, U.S. National Archives.)

The building is basically "U" shaped, with the open part of the U facing Thirteenth Street. The U is open on the second, third, and fourth floors; the U is enclosed on the first floor and contains the entrance lobby and part of the dining room.

Large areas of the left and right sides of both the Thirteenth and T Street facades are taken up by massive 4' deep projections.

Each of the two sides of the Thirteenth Street facade has four bays. The recessed center area of the U contains one bay. Each of the two projections on the T Street side contains three bays. The center portion of this side has six bays.

2. Foundation: Concrete.
3. Wall construction, finish, and color: Thirteenth and T Street facades are covered in buff colored tapestry brick laid in common bond without headers. A flush belt course of bricks paired in an alternating horizontal and vertical pattern runs above the basement windows. Beneath the third floor windows is a finished-stone band that also serves as a window sill. Above the third floor windows is another stone band, and above it are panels of brick that are enclosed by a rectangular band of bricks laid in soldier fashion. The first, second, and third floor windows of each of the four projecting sections are united by a band of bricks, laid in soldier-fashion, that surrounds the group of windows.

East and south facades are covered with common quality red brick laid in American bond.

According to the building permit, 400,000 bricks were to be used.

4. Structural system: Reinforced concrete with girderless floors. Interior walls are hollow tile.
5. Chimneys: In the southeast is the large furnace chimney. Midway along the east wall is the kitchen chimney.
6. Openings:
 - a. Thirteenth Street entrance: The main entrance is highly architectural and imposing. The original double French doors, with a denticulated sill at the bottom of the glazed panel of each door, remain. Above the doors is a semi-circular fanlight. The doors are set into a recessed portico with a Palladian motif. On each side of the portico is a free-standing Roman Doric column. On each side of the doorway are two pilasters, one beside the door and one at the front of the narrow wall of the recess. On either side of the doorway is also a small ten-light casement window. Surmounting the columns is a semi-circular stone arch, with keystone, that frames the fanlight.

On either side of the recessed portico are two pairs of brick pilasters and pedestals that rest against the main structure. The bricks of the pilasters are laid in a manner to represent rustication; each fifth row is slightly recessed to give the needed shadow. The bases and the caps of the pilasters are stone. Surmounting the pilasters and extending across the top of the central semi-circular arch is a frieze and cornice. The frieze has a triglyph and metope pattern on either side of the incised word "Whitelaw." Atop the modillioned cornice is a brick parapet whose angularity is somewhat out of character with the classical proportions of other parts of the entrance. Set into the center of the parapet is a shield-shaped stone.

T Street entrance: The double French doors of this entrance are reached by a flight of eight steps. On either side of the doors is a quarter of an engaged Ionic column set on a pedestal. Above the doorway is a transom.

There is also an entrance on T Street to the "grotto" dining room in the basement. This is a single French door reached by a short flight of downward steps.

- b. Windows: Flanking the main Thirteenth Street entrance, on the first floor, are multi-paned double casement windows with a flat-topped transom above. Above the casement windows, on the second, third, and fourth floors, are double windows, each of which has a double-hung, one-over-one sash. Similar windows are on the floors above the T Street entrance and on the bay windows found on the narrow part of the "U". A wide, multi-paned triple window on the T Street side provides light to the basement dining room. The remainder of the windows on the Thirteenth and T Street facades are single, flat-topped, double-hung windows with one-over-one sash.

Windows on the east and south sides are double-hung with one-over-one sash. All have segmentally arched lintels.

7. Roof: Flat with slag roofing.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: There are three separate parts to the basement.

At the northwest corner of the building are suites of rooms arranged along a dog-legged hallway that can be reached at one end by an exterior door from T Street or at the other end via a short flight of steps from the lobby. In this area was located a barbershop and suites of rooms for a women's hairdresser and a physician.

A small second basement area in the southwest corner, reached by a long flight of steps, contained a tailor shop.

A third basement area was L-shaped and stretched along the east and part of the south side. In the northeast corner is a restaurant described in 1919 as a "grotto," for small dinner parties. This room could be reached from an entrance on T Street or by stairs from the first floor promenade. Adjoining the restaurant is the kitchen which was connected with the first-floor dining room by a stairway. Store rooms and servants' rooms adjoined the kitchen. In the southeast corner of the basement is the dug-out furnace room. Next to it, along the south side, is a storage room and an apartment for the janitor.

- b. First floor: Because of the high basement, the first floor is located on two levels. Part of it is almost at ground level and part is elevated.

Ground level: The Thirteenth Street entrance opens into an entrance lobby, 19'-6" x 10'-10". This lobby provides access to several rooms and areas:

Apartments in the south wing are reached by a short upward flight of steps.

Downward steps lead to the tailor shop.

The women's lounge, 9'-6" x 9'-9", with adjoining toilet and lavatory, opens off of the lobby on the south side of the front of the building.

Double French doors with fan light above (which correspond to the main entrance doorway) lead to one portion of the dining room.

A single French door leads into the other half of the dining room.

Archways lead to the lobby and to the promenade on the north side.

The lobby is 20'-10" x 11'-5" with a ceiling height of 13'-10". Two steps above the lobby, and running parallel with T Street, is the promenade, 29'-10" x 10'-11", with a ceiling height of 12'-6". On the south side of the promenade are two sets of doors that open into the dining room. An alcove on the north side indicates where the clerk's desk was originally located. At the east end of the promenade, stairways provide access to the T Street entrance, to the basement dining room, and to the apartment and transient room areas.

In the center of the first floor is the elaborately decorated dining room which is divided into two parts, the two sections being separated by a single square column. The north portion of the dining room is octagonal in shape (the sides are not equal in length, however), approximately 25'-3" x 44'. The south half of the dining room is rectangular and measures approximately 21' x 44'.

Elevated apartment and transient room areas: An L shaped portion along the east and south sides contains four apartments of various numbers of rooms. Another section of rooms is in the northwest corner and along the T Street side. There are five rooms and two bathrooms arranged along a dog-legged hallway. Whether they were originally apartments or transient rooms, or a combination of both, is undertermined.

- c. Second, third, and fourth floors: These floors are reached via interior stairs located near the southeast and the northeast corners of the buildings.

These three floors originally had identical floor plans. Seven apartments (2, five room and bath; 4, four room and bath; and 1, three room and bath) were arranged around the north, east, and south walls and around the south and west walls of the court formed by the U shape of the building.

On each floor were seven transient rooms, some of which were arranged as a suite. None had a private bath room, but separate men's and women's facilities were provided. All of the transient rooms were in the north wing and thus faced either the courtyard, Thirteenth Street, or in the case of two rooms, T Street.

An interior U shaped hallway connects all of the apartments and transient rooms.

- 2. Stairways: Aside from the several short flights of steps leading to various areas from the first floor, there are two main stairways connecting the upper floors. One is located in the northeast area and runs from the first to the fourth floors, while the stairway in the southeast corner connects the basement with the upper floors. Both of these stairways are concrete with two runs between each floor.
- 3. Wall and ceiling finish: All walls are plastered over metal lath. A 1919 description said that the public area walls were plastered in "cream tones," while the ceilings were white. (Bee, July 9, 1919). Caps of the columns and pilasters in the public areas and dining room retain their gilding.

4. Flooring: Concrete in the public areas (although it was impossible to determine the flooring in the first-floor dining room), offices and all hallways. These concrete floors, particularly those in the public areas, were probably originally carpeted. Apartments and transient rooms have hardwood floors.
5. Doorways and doors: Interior doors have either a five horizontal panel design, or have three panels, the center one being much larger than the others.
6. Decorative features: Much of the decorative plaster work remains in the entrance lobby, lobby, promenade, and the ladies' lounge. This consists of cornices, and wall moldings surrounding areas that were probably originally plastered. Columns and pilasters have foliated capitals and shafts that are decorated with plaster ribbons and festoons.

The decorative treatment of the area surrounding each of the two sets of pairs of French doors connecting the promenade and the dining room is particularly handsome. On either side of the French doors are wide pedestals. Above each of the pedestals is a multi-paned window set between pilasters. A wide cornice, with an egg and dart and a dentil motif, stretches across the windows and the doorway. Above the French doors is a half-round fan light.

The dining room is divided into a northern octagonal area and a southern rectangular section. The decor of the dining room is particularly elaborate. On the south wall are two built-in sideboards that echo the design of the doorways opposite that lead to the promenade. The lower portion of each of the sideboards has wooden cupboard doors, while the upper portion has a mirrored back and glass shelves.

The ceilings of the two dining areas originally had large "art-glass" panels that have now collapsed. Invisible incandescent lighting was set behind these panels, while a skylight was also above the panel in the northern part of the room.

Other decorative features of the dining room include an elaborate plaster cornice with a trellis design; pilasters (and the single column) with plaster ribbons, festoons, an oval panel which once contained a two-light candelabra; and an open-work screen (along one of the chamfered octagonal walls) in a diamond-shaped reticulated pattern.

7. Lighting: The original metal six-light chandeliers still hang in the lobby and the promenade. In a few apartments some of the original simple light fixtures, with exposed bulbs, remain.
- D. General Setting and Orientation: The building is located at the southeast corner of the intersection of Thirteenth and U Streets. It faces due west. This is an architecturally interesting neighborhood that was once a center of Washington's middle-class population. There has been some decay in the neighborhood, but there is noticeable restoration activity.

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